



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# A METHOD OF TEACHING ENGLISH COMPOSITION TO FIRST SEMESTER FRESHMEN IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

---

EDNA OSBORNE  
Lawrence, Kansas

---

Blessed with a master's degree and a year's experience in a small high school, I entered boldly into my work in a large modern high school where efficiency was the keynote. For my own success I relied more on my youth and enthusiasm than upon the fundamental principles which I had so rigidly learned in education courses at the university. Teachers' meetings, both general and departmental, were not particularly helpful to me. There the old and very wise teachers aired their knowledge, and we younger teachers, "Freshmen pedagogues" as we were dubbed, were too timid to speak up and present our problems.

After a month I realized that something was radically wrong with my work. Students when they entered my classes did not know how to write with any regard for the rules of punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. We had no special classes in composition, and had to teach it with other English work. A class section averaged thirty, and it was impossible for a teacher to handle frequent long compositions. Student work in the classics and in oral themes was not bad, but in written composition the children did not seem to be getting anywhere. Every week I assigned some topic in all my classes and required a composition, written out of class and due by Friday. After I had corrected the papers and returned them, I required a rewritten copy with all corrections. At the conference hour I had interviews with pupils who made the more serious mistakes and explained the whys and wherefores of English words and constructions. It was very hard work. Saturdays and Sundays used to be hateful to me because a large stack of compositions mocked me from my study table. If I had felt

that I was getting adequate returns for my work in the increased ability of my classes to write simple English, I should have been happy, but I failed to see the slightest improvement.

At our departmental meetings I listened for suggestions on the Freshman composition work. By December my boldness and enthusiasm had left me and I felt as though I had not earned my November salary. At our next departmental meeting I spoke of my problem. The lone man in the English department looked at me in rather fatherly fashion (he had taught English in high schools fourteen years) and said that one never saw results in Freshman composition, and very rarely discerned much advance in the Senior compositions. The literary genius of the department, who was efficiency personified, suggested that results would surely come if I had the students rewrite their corrections a number of times. Keeping notebooks was the salvation of her students. I smiled as I thought of the old, old story of the boy who wrote "I have gone" one hundred times and then left this note for his teacher, "I have written 'I have gone' one hundred times, and now I have went home." Nevertheless, I tried the notebook plan. My results were nil.

The schedule for second semester classes came out, and I discovered that I had most of the new Freshmen. Then I thought of the plan which was to give comparatively satisfactory results. I took Woolley's *Handbook of Composition* and carefully selected thirty or so rules that are habitually violated. The rules are all numbered, and constant use of the book had made me perfectly familiar with the numbers of those most commonly broken. This memorizing of the numbers was for me easy, and increased my speed in correcting. Then every day I required each pupil to hand in *one written paragraph* (not more than a hundred words). These paragraphs could not be reproductions of anything they had read—for I found some would copy verbatim if allowed to hand in non-original material—but must tell of some personal experience or of some incident they had witnessed. I carefully checked off each composition to see that no one was shirking, and selected six or seven to be corrected each day. Thus I got around the class once a week.

The papers were few, short, and interesting; hence the work of correcting went rapidly. In the margin at the left of any error I wrote the number of the rule violated and I underlined the error itself. While correcting, I made memoranda of important errors. The next day, when the corrected papers were returned, I put the sentences containing the errors on the board, being careful to give no hint as to the authors, and asked the pupils to discover the errors. Very soon the class learned to detect them. Then I would tell them to find the proper rule in their texts and would have one pupil read, explain, and show how this particular rule was violated in the sentence on the board. In this way all the important rules in the book were not only made clear but mastered for all time.

I remembered the "literary efficiency" teacher's advice to me. The pupils who had had their compositions returned were not required to write a new composition that night but were to correct their old ones—write every misspelled word ten times and every rule five times for each time it was violated.

A student's criticism of his own mistake was often exceedingly helpful. Often, if a paragraph was particularly bad I copied the whole of it on the board, had it corrected orally, and then had the students bring in for the next exercise the same ideas written in their own language but avoiding the errors found in the original.

I rarely spent more than ten or fifteen minutes on the composition work each day, yet the results were surprisingly satisfactory.

At the close of the school year I met the "literary efficiency" teacher in the hall just as we were both about to enter a general teachers' meeting. "My," she said, "you look so calm, sane, and self-satisfied; I wonder why?"

"Oh no, not self-satisfied," I implored, "but I do hope I look calm and sane."

"You do not answer my question."

I looked at the self-poised person opposite me. "Perhaps," I continued, "you gave me a cue; in fact, I really believe you did."